

WOMEN AND WAR

Olive (Cousins) Henderson Women's Royal Canadian Navy Services – Leading Wren No. 210

Facts:

- Between 1942 and 1946 approximately 7,000 Canadian women served in the Navy in 39 non-combatant positions.
- One thousand Wrens were in Halifax and its environs; 500 were in Newfoundland
- HMCS Conestoga was the Wren basic training ship at Galt, Ontario. Lt. Cdr. Isabel Maneill was its first commanding officer. As the first female captain of a 'ship' she, like royalty, was entitled to be piped aboard

Before the Reading

- When did Newfoundland join Canada?
- When ships go into dry docks or go in for refitting, what is traditionally done to them?
- With new army, navy and airforce units being created in Canada, what kind of facilities would most likely have been used for training?

MY NAVY YEARS 1942 – 1945

When I heard that the Navy was taking women into the service, I decided to join; or at least sign up and hope they would take me. I applied for a position as a Coder, but was placed in Central Stores.

There were four weeks of Basic Training before we were sent to wherever we were needed. A group of us, about thirty in all, were sent to Niagara Falls in January for a four-week long Supply Course. We were billeted at the Fox Head Inn.

Every morning after breakfast our Squad Leader marched us along the road overlooking the falls. It was cold and crisp, but we enjoyed it. We had our classes morning and afternoon, just like school. Afterwards we were free to do whatever we wanted but, of course, could not go very far away. We had the services of the hotel and did not have to do cleaning or dishes or anything like that.

Upon returning to Galt, I was put on staff with a few others and was stationed there for a year. During that time, the WRENS took over the Preston Springs Hotel in Preston, a few miles away. We had to take the inventory of the whole place. This took quite a while because it was a large hotel.

When November came, I was sent to Shelbourne, Nova Scotia, partway down the East Coast. There was no Wren Barracks there at that time, so another Wren and I had to live with the Army Girls, CWACS (Canadian Women's Army Corps) for a few weeks until they made room for the Wrens at the Naval Base.

This was a refitting Port for the ships. At Christmas, we were the only two Wrens at the base. One of us had to be there on duty. My friend chose Christmas for her leave, so I had New Years to go home for a few days. There was a ship tied up in the harbour on Christmas Day so the ship's company invited me for dinner. It was a fun day after all.

Before long, we had all sorts of Wrens ... cooks, stewards, stores keepers, office workers, nurses, etc. We also had a band to keep our morale up. When we had a three-day pass we would hop on the rickety old train up to Halifax or down to Yarmouth for a change.

One time we had a German sub brought into the harbour. My brother, Bill, was on the Shore Patrol, stationed there at that time. There were nets strung across the mouth of the harbour to keep out enemy ships and submarines; these were let down to allow our ships to pass through.

I was at Shelbourne until November 4th, 1944. During that time, we had the option of signing up for overseas duty, which my good friend and I did. Millie was posted to Scotland and I was sent to St. John's Newfoundland (HMCS Avalon.) Yes, it was overseas at that time. It wasn't until a few years later that it became a part of Canada.

Our base naval stores were located in a large building across the harbour. We would get a ride down the hill and the harbour aircraft (something like a tugboat) would take us across to work every day. One day a Destroyer came in with a large hole in its side. We also had a surrendered German submarine come into harbour in June 1945. May 8th, 1945, we had V.E. Day (victory in Europe) to celebrate.

During the summer of 1945, I received a posting to Victoria, B.C. I was to have my leave in August on my way out to the West Coast. During that time we had victory in Japan day. There was a great celebration going on everywhere. I thought my trip out west would be cancelled but it wasn't. I had an enjoyable train trip out west along with a few other Wrens. When we got there we found out we were no longer needed except to finish up various things. We were sent back to Galt in September to await our discharge. My friend and others also returned home from Scotland. My discharge came through on November 5th, three years from the day I arrived there.

After the Reading

- List all the places that Olive went during her Wren service. How would these 3 – 4 years of service have differed from what would probably have been her life if there had been no war.
- What evidence of war did Olive witness even though she did not go to Europe?
- Although Wrens, like Olive, were in non-combatant positions, in what ways were they essential to the war effort?

Extensions

- Halifax Harbour has borne witness to several tragedies. Find out how Halifax was involved with the sinking of the Titanic and what happened in 1917.
- Read all or parts of the novel *Seven Magpies* by Monica Hughes and *Women of the War Years*, (available at www.airmuseum.ca/waryears.html) a compilation of interviews with 200 women to expand your understanding of the roles of women in the war years.